

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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WHY WRITE?

LETTER *From a Discouraged Scribbler to His Author Friend:*
Dear—

I have been in the writing game for quite a number of years and during that time have very seldom complained about the hardships and disappointments attendant thereon. But I believe I have reached a pass where I must unburden myself to someone who may appreciate my position.

I have always accepted rejection slips as a portion of the burden which every writer must bear, and have rarely registered a kick when a story came back. But I did and always shall hold the belief that when one's work has been good enough to be accepted by an editor, that editor ought at least to read his contributor's future stories, and if they do not meet requirements, drop him a short note with the return of his manuscript, stating in a few words why it failed to meet his needs.

Recently I had a short-story published in Blank Magazine. After that, I submitted three short-stories, and while they wrote a brief note of explanation when returning the first two, the last one came back with the old contemptuous rejection slip. This I can only explain in one way—that they are tired of reading my efforts and that I have no chance of getting another story accepted.

This has made me bitter against the magazine editors. It has destroyed all the faith and good feeling I once possessed in the writing game.

It is just a game of everlasting spending but seldom receiving money, as a story is rarely fit to go to an editor without first being criticised. On top of this must be considered the postage, the stationery wasted, and the time that might be devoted to something of a more profitable nature.

As I have said before, this has embittered me to the point where

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I don't know whether I should continue writing or not. I am turning to you for advice.

Sincerely,

The answer:

Dear _____

It is always difficult to advise another about matters such as you have brought up in your letter. As a matter of fact, my usual advice to anyone seriously in doubt whether or not to continue his literary efforts is "Don't."

This does not apply to the writer who is passing through a period of temporary discouragement. If I know that writer really wants to go on, I try to encourage him—to help him to "buck up" and continue the good fight.

But if it is more than a matter of temporary discouragement, and if the writer, after serious reflection, and an extended trial of the game, really doubts the wisdom of striving further, I cannot feel justified in urging him to do so.

It is really only the few who make a brilliant success at writing. A large share of magazine contributions are furnished by writers who cannot quite make a living at the work, but who are able to write and sell a fair number of stories as a side line. A somewhat smaller proportion of the stories are furnished by writers who are just on the border line of turning out work of salable quality. They sell only an occasional story that strikes the editorial fancy. You belong to this class. You would not have sold that one story if your work had not been up to the standard—and yet you would have sold more if it had been further over the line.

I reasoned this out for myself a good many years ago. I had sold two or three stories. That showed me I was capable of writing salable stuff. But to offset this I wrote dozens of stories that seemingly would not sell.

Looking at it from a cold, commercial point of view, I decided that it would not pay me to go on writing.

Nevertheless, I made up my mind that I *would* go on writing—and working just as hard as I possibly could to make my stories effective. Why? Just because I enjoyed the work and felt that it did me good whether or not I ever sold another story. It was education, if nothing else.

That is the only advice to you that I feel able to give. Don't go on writing unless you are sure that you can eliminate the matter of editorial recognition altogether from consideration. If you desire

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so intensely to write that you are willing to write without hope of recognition or remuneration, do so. In fact, if that is the case, you *will* do so whether I tell you to or not.

Of course, this need not bar you from trying to make your stories salable, or submitting them persistently. It is the attitude of mind that counts.

If you should decide that you want to go on writing regardless of the possibility of getting your work published, I don't know how matters will work out for you. In my case, I might say that a year or so after making this decision I seemed to "hit my stride" and to sell a pretty fair proportion of my yarns. But even if this had not occurred, I am sure I would still be writing today.

About the treatment you have received from Blank Magazine, I think you rather exaggerate the extent of the slight. It might be explained by the fact that the editor who had been corresponding with you was away, or exceptionally busy. As a matter of fact, I have found that editors usually do just about as you have described. They'll write personal letters in returning the first stories rejected after one has been accepted, but drop the custom thereafter. I've had numerous plain rejection slips from editors who were accepting a great deal of my work.

This won't solve your problem, but it may help *you* to solve it.

Sincerely,

THE FRAME AND THE PICTURE

WHY the story within a story? Sometimes, it is true, a tale can best be developed by introducing characters only indirectly involved in it and letting one of them tell the actual story; but usually this plan is but the result of self-consciousness on the part of the author—a desire to put some sort of "bumper" between himself and his reader.

If the story is strong enough to interest as a tale within a tale, it should be strong enough to interest by itself. If extraneous matter and outside characters are needed to "put it across," it must be faulty in some respect.

You cannot make an imperfect picture any better by putting a frame around it.

Perhaps the best advice that can be given in this connection is: Put away all idea of an introduction outside of the actual story until the story has been developed to its highest possible point. If it is a good enough story to stand alone, then consider whether the extraneous introduction will give it an added touch of effectiveness. In other words, if you have a good story, but feel that it would be all

the better for being told around a campfire, by all means let it so be told. Only, don't use the introduction unless you are sure the story does not need it.

Reverting to our former simile: Don't put a frame on the picture until you are sure you have a picture to frame.

AT THE ROAD'S TURNING

HOW near we may be to the "turn of the road" without knowing it! After years of discouragement, the very next piece of work we turn out, or the next submission of some old manuscript, may be the key that unlocks the editorial doors. These reflections are called up by a letter just at hand. The writer evidently refers to the article on Ben Ames Williams which appeared in the issue of January, 1920. Note what a narrow escape this writer had from stopping in her journey just short of the turning point.

My Dear Mr. Hawkins:

You may be interested to know that in a moment of discouragement The Student-Writer of some months ago came to hand, containing an article giving the experience of some successful writer who had nothing accepted until he had written eighty unsuccessful manuscripts. I decided to count my efforts, agreeing with myself that if they numbered eighty I was "through" and would turn my attention to ironing and dish-washing.

They were seventy-eight! So I struggled on and since then have had twelve acceptances, none of them wonderful success, but at least an encouragement. And as your little magazine is responsible for my continued pursuit of the work more enjoyable than anything else, I want to thank you.

Very respectfully yours,

A. C. C.

A PAT ON THE BACK

A WHOLE-SOULED letter of appreciation never comes amiss in the editorial office. Here is one to The Student-Writer from Richard K. Wood, writer-photographer, author of "The Fur Pocket on Seward," and other tales.

"I am sending my duplicate copies of The Student-Writer to writer friends. While I have nearly everything published in this line, I want to hand it to you for having the most practical beginners' magazine and book in the field, and for the most modest price. 'Snowballing a Plot' is worth the price of the book, 'Helps For Student-Writers.'

"I never took a correspondence course in my life or made any special study of the English language, much less its use as applicable to writing for a living, but just the same have been selling all the articles I find time to write, and some fiction. For three years past I have been an advertising manager and field specialist with a manufacturing firm that sent me to odd corners after wild life photographs, and I draw on this experience mostly.

"Having read at least one story by you, I shall not hesitate to seek your counsel in the future. "Very truly yours, "DICK" WOOD."

REVISION OF PROSE AND VERSE, in The Student-Writer workshop, is in charge of Mr. John H. Clifford, whose long experience as a reviser, compiler, and editor with leading New York publishing houses is placed at the disposal of writers who desire to attain toward distinctive literary standards. His intuitive and scholarly help is particularly recommended for verse writers.

CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 22.

FILL in your outlines. Many a good story is born in the author's mind but never reaches an audience because the characters and incidents were not made live actualities before the reader.

It is one thing to tell us that the villain is jealous of the hero, another to let the villain talk in such a way that the reader can see the evidences of that jealousy.

Put in the conversations of chief significance, and the other intimate details that make the incidents a reality. Don't start with explaining who the characters are, or how they came to be where the story finds them. Begin with an interesting incident, or a passage of dialogue, in which the chief characters and their relationships are revealed. After the reader's interest has been captured, you can pause a moment for explanations.

Realistic incidents, taking place, as it were, before the eyes of

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the reader, are what give a story life and actuality. Think of the action as taking place on a stage, and fill in the outlines with dialogue and action such as would have to be acted out in order to make the story a living reality to the audience. That is what is meant by dramatic narration.

Fragment 24.

DO you ever get rusty on the technique of composition? Won't the chapter of "Characterization" in some favorite book lead you to boil down your sentences into a more forceful delineation? And the one on "Titles"? Editors have a liking for unique and striking titles, you know. Possibly after reading the chapter you may hit on a better one for that last offering. And that especially helpful article on dialogue you found in a magazine. Review it. The work you do that day will be the better for it.

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Fragment 23.

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Review

THE great danger in trying to be subtle is in being merely commonplace. The reader may not grasp your subtle point, and if he fails to do so the passage is wasted.

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See also discounts for advance deposits offered on page 5.

"Dear Mr. Hawkins: The club as a whole was so pleased with your criticism of my story that it has concluded your criticisms are what it needs. The members were favorably impressed with the constructiveness of the criticism, rather than the destructiveness, and also at the clever way you have of putting your finger on the exact weakness, so to speak.

"RENA REYNOLDS,
"The Austin Kwill Klub."

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The big writer, as a rule, is the most appreciative of criticism; the little fellow resents it. Perhaps this is why the big writer IS big—because he retains his capacity for growth.